Idea and Image in Schoenberg's Moses und Aron

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Among the many literary riches of the early twentieth century, it is easy to overlook the astonishing translation of the Hebrew Bible into German by the philosophers Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig of 1924.[1] The project, which caused considerable controversy, aimed to reshape biblical language in the vernacular from its very foundations.[2] No small ambition, considering that almost exactly four centuries previously, Luther's translation of both Old and New Testaments into German had significantly contributed to the standardization of the vernacular. But the foundational role of Luther's Bible translation for the German language, Buber and Rosenzweig argued, had actually turned into a problem: the powerful original text of the Bible had completely lost its specialness and strangeness, as it had, inevitably, been fully assimilated into the German vernacular. So the philosophers set out to make the familiar strange again, and to recreate a poetic language in German that could form some analogue to the verbal power of the archaic Hebrew text.

Rosenzweig and Buber's translation efforts results in a stark, unadorned and direct language that is often striking in its simplicity. On the one hand, certain Hebrew words, especially the names of biblical characters, are faithfully transliterated: Moses is Moshe, Aaron is Aharon. More strikingly perhaps, the names of the individual books of the Pentateuch move closer to the original Hebrew by resuming the Jewish tradition of calling them by their incipits. Whereas in Christian tradition, the common name of the second book of Moses, *Exodus* (meaning departure in Greek), has been adopted by Greek, Latin and vernacular translations, Rosenzweig and Buber are closer to the Hebrew name for the book, *Shemot* ("Names," from *ve-eleh shemot*, or "These are the names," with which the text begins in

the Hebrew Bible), when they title the second book "Das Buch Namen." On the other hand, Rosenzweig and Buber invent neologisms and employ words in ways that pointedly set them off from everyday usage. Occasionally, critics have argued, their rendition of the text comes close to indulging a Wagnerian fetish for alliteration.[3] But both strategies—archaisms and neologisms—ultimately work toward the same goal: making the familiar strange. The foil of the Lutheran text, bound up as it is with the very fabric of the German language, remains as a palimpsest over which Rosenzweig and Buber recreate a version of the Hebrew Bible that is original in the strongest sense: it both goes back to *ur*-traditions of scripture and is, at the same time, relentlessly modern.

There are striking intellectual and spiritual parallels to Schoenberg's full-length twelve-tone opera *Moses und Aron*, a project that he began to conceive around the same time. To be sure, Schoenberg did not base his libretto on the Buber-Rosenzweig translation directly. A Jew converted to Protestantism, he worked with the traditional Lutheran version of the Bible.[4] Yet the wider aesthetic goals of Schoenberg's monumental work exhibit a comparable attempt to recreate a musical language anew that straddles the extremes. Here is a work that is both avant-garde and archaic, both non-representational and operatic, both thoroughly rational and mythological, both idea and image.

Extremes join in infinity, as they do in Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*. The essays in this issue all grapple with aspects of the pairs of extremes that are laid out in Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*. Joseph Auner presents an introductory exploration into the genesis of the work and its significance within Schoenberg's oeuvre. Where Schoenberg is typically likened to Moses' character, Auner demonstrates that he resembled Aron more closely than is usually admitted.

By the time Schoenberg began composing the music of *Moses und Aron*, he had gained considerable experience with the idiom of composition with twelve tones, which he had developed in the 1920s. Ethan Haimo delves in detail into the twelve-tone technique of the opera and shows how the complex musical construction goes far beyond the general rules of twelve-tone composition, highlighting higher-order structural concerns. Such breath-taking, rigorous construction is often regarded as an expression of the highly developed rationalization of the tonal material. Schoenberg, however, also remains beholden to a numerological superstition, which may appear out of place but which in the final analysis contributed to his decision to abandon the project.

A touchstone in the articles in this volume is the opening scene of *Moses und Aron*, in which Moses encounters God in the Burning Bush. It is this divine voice that sets the stage for all the events and reflections that follow. Alexander Rehding examines the problematic of beginnings in a scene that is both part of and set apart from the rest of the opera. Musically, too, this primal scene is unique: it attains a level of closeness between voices and instruments that is no longer attained, no longer attainable, as the opera runs its course.

Elliott Gyger's article considers the opposition of speech, in the form of *Sprechstimme*, and of singing in the opera, not only in the persons of the two brothers but also in the rich and varied writing for the chorus. This opposition becomes a powerful symbol for some of the work's central dichotomies: inarticulacy *vs.* eloquence, thought *vs.* utterance, depth *vs.* surface. The intrusion of speech also threatens to invert or destabilize the representational conventions of operatic tradition, even rendering the singing voice morally suspect.

Daniel Albright's meditation, "Butchering Moses," picks up a similar strand of thought and considers the character of Moses in the context of the history and the institution of opera. Schoenberg's distinctly un-operatic Moses is held up against the emphatically operatic

orgiastic scenes of Act II, especially the Dance of the Butchers, which wallows in an excess of compositional procedures and sounds that Schoenberg elsewhere disdains. Albright reads this aesthetic dichotomy against Schoenberg's modernist aesthetics and his own uneasy conception of his position in music history.

Long passages of the libretto to *Moses und Aron* read like an aesthetic pamphlet, a manifesto of non-representation. Schoenberg's Moses is, of course, the embodiment of the Idea, a categorical non-representationalist, who in his search for purity admits that even the word must be distrusted. Schoenberg's Moses has no choice in the final analysis but to fall silent, with the opera itself, at the end of Act II. Eric Zakim constrasts this uncompromising figure with images of a rather more bodily Moses, a veritable muscleman, which rapidly gained currency in Jewish culture in the early twentieth century. In many ways, the contrast between body and intellect, or representation and non-representation, which is divided in the opera between Aron and Moses, is part of a much wider cultural discourse, which links the intellectual issues at the core of the work with contemporary cultural and political concerns.

The issues articulated in this series of essays, on questions of idea and image, lead us back to the wider question of modernity. Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, struggling between irreconcilable opposites, is emblematic to the modern condition. The constant effort to straddle the extremes is ultimately the reason that the work remained incomplete. As such it remains a torso, a suitably enigmatic testament to a fractured century.

Much has already been said about the compositional technique, the theology, indeed its *Kunstreligion*, and the problem of modernism in the opera. Many of these discussions have the effect of further monumentalizing the ambitions of the work—of placing it on a pedestal as a towering aesthetic absolute. Schoenberg, arguably, labored hard himself to support and cement exactly this impression. We compile these essays to counterpoint this approach in

productive ways. The authors steer the discussion to previously underexplored aspects, providing starting points for renewed reflection about the important themes raised in Schoenberg's project. The collection encourages a multi-faceted view of the work, both appreciating it for its unique aesthetic impact and at the same time considering it as the product of a very specific cultural context, much like the Rosenzweig-Buber Bible translation. Embracing the extremes that *Moses und Aron* straddles may indeed help us to come to terms with an opera that is so recalcitrant in its operatic identity, that stands as a modernist manifesto, and that has not relinquished any of its specialness and strangeness for the best part of a century.

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[1] Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Die fünf Bücher der Weisung* (Cologne, Olten: Jakob Hegner, 1956).

[2] See Peter Eli Gordon, *Rosenzweig und Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 237-274.

[3] See Siegfried Kracauer, "The Bible in German," in Thomas Y. Levin, tr., *The Mass Ornament* (Princeton. NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 189-202.

[4] See Pamela Cooper-White, *Schoenberg and the God-Idea: The Opera Moses und Aron*: (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1985).